

# Gossip as a Channel for Circulating Subversive Truth: In Heym's The King David Report, the GDR and the Jardin du Luxembourg

David Fishelov

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Article abstract

In *The King David Report* (1972), Stefan Heym (1913-2001) offers a favorable view of gossip, notwithstanding biblical censuring of that activity (e.g. Proverb 11:13). Heym's satirical re-telling of the biblical story focuses on the character of Ethan, a writer-historian appointed by King Solomon to compose an official report on the life and rise to power of King David. At one point Ethan's two sons, Shem and Sheleph, come back from the market, telling Ethan of some "juicy" rumors they heard there. These rumors, while using some exaggerations and added embellishments, nevertheless provide insights into the political situation much more faithful to the truth than the fabrications of official spokespersons. To substantiate Heym's literary portrayal of gossip as a channel for communicating subversive truth in authoritarian regimes, I cite Robert Darnton's systematic historical research into the diverse channels for communicating news in Paris of the eighteenth century (Darnton, 2000).

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**Gossip as a Channel for Circulating Subversive Truth:  
In Heym's *The King David Report*, the GDR and the Jardin du Luxembourg\***

**David Fishelov**  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
Israel

**Gossip and the Bible**

Any Internet search of the string "gossip AND Bible" would bring us to sites that cite a few biblical verses in support of a moralistic denouncement of the pervasive social phenomenon of gossip. These verses suggest that gossip is harmful, at worst, or immoral and idle, at best, and the moralizing writings make it clear that one should distance oneself from such activity. Verses commonly cited in this context are taken from the Old and the New Testament alike: "You must not go about spreading slander among your people; you must not jeopardize your neighbor's life" (Leviticus 19:16); "A gossip goes around revealing a secret, but a trustworthy person keeps a confidence" (Proverbs 11:13);<sup>1</sup> "They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips" [NIV] (Romans 1:29).<sup>2</sup>

Before hastening to embrace these moral denouncements, however, we should examine more carefully the meaning of the biblical verses on which they rely. In Leviticus 19:16, for example, it is clear that the Bible refers to an inherently malicious act equivalent to jeopardizing the life of a neighbor; in Proverbs 11:13 the contrastive structure ("A gossip... but...") indicates that gossip is just like a betrayal of trust, implying harmful consequences; and Romans 1:29 lumps together gossip with a list of serious crimes and sins (e.g. murder, deceit), creating the impression that 'gossip' is an appropriate label for all of these dreadful activities.<sup>3</sup> These meanings associated with the term in the Bible, however, are quite far from what we usually do when we gossip, whether we actively spread "the latest news" about a social acquaintance or we passively listen to a sensational rumor about the president's wife. To participate in such verbal exchanges, whether actively or passively, usually does not increase the crime level on the streets, nor does it cause any tangible damage to our acquaintance or to the president's wife. It thus seems that many of the moralistic denouncements of gossip that cite the above biblical verses confuse between a malicious activity, deliberately intended to cause harm to a third party, and the ubiquitous practice of talking about a third party in less than favorable terms. Whereas the former is indeed morally wrong, the latter is a relatively innocuous activity; perhaps it is not very noble (compared, say, to conducting a philosophical dialogue) and also somewhat idle, but it is still very far from being sinful, criminal or murderous. Apropos of biblical verses, perhaps before harshly condemning gossip we should paraphrase John 8:7: Let he who is not engaged in one form or another of gossip cast the first stone.

If we want to better understand the different manifestations and functions of gossip, rather than adopting a moralizing position that denounces gossip and citing biblical verses for its support, we should simply turn to contemporary dictionaries that adopt a descriptive approach. Such definitions, rather than trumpeting moralistic denouncements, describe gossip's conspicuous characteristics as we all know it. Gossip is thus defined as "To talk idly, mostly about other people's affairs; to go about tattling."<sup>4</sup> Thus, everyday gossip often has a sensational nature ("have you heard that Mr. Smith is cheating on his wife?"), and it seems to fulfill a variety of psychological and social functions: to get to know more about our neighbors ("did you know that the newly appointed professor was denied tenure elsewhere?"); to vent envy or frustration ("I heard that he succeeded in publishing his latest book only because he is personally acquainted with the publisher"); or to belittle people of high rank, so that they become just like us, ordinary people ("did you know that the prime minister has a habit of picking his nose?").

We can further assume that a significant part of our daily conversation consists in talking in non-favorable terms about a third party and hence can be qualified as gossip. Were we to

compare the percentage of such utterances with the percentage of verbal exchanges that say something positive and corroborated about a third party, it would become clear how deeply we are involved in gossip, including even the most righteous among us ("well, I don't like to gossip, but are you sure that Mr. Smith is cheating on his wife?"). When we acknowledge the fact that gossip is a ubiquitous social practice, it becomes difficult to argue that something that we do so often is inherently immoral or has a destructive social function. Moreover, in addition to the above psychological functions, gossip seems to serve a positive, cohesive social function: it helps individuals to form social alliances and strengthens communal ties and, by the same token, it helps to distance oneself from other individuals and groups ("she is so vain and stupid; you should not accept her as a friend on Facebook").<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, I would like to argue that in addition to fulfilling certain vital psychological and social functions, in some political contexts gossip also serves a liberating, progressive social function. In order to support this argument, let us first examine how gossip is represented in a modern novel based on the Bible: *The King David Report* by the Jewish-German writer Stefan Heym (1913-2001). In contradistinction to the moralistic denunciations of the biblical verses, Heym's iconoclastic novel suggests a totally different perspective on the subject.

### **Gossip in Heym's *The King David Report***

Stefan Heym published *The King David Report* in English in 1972, when he was living in the former East Germany (GDR). The book is a satirical re-writing of the biblical story of King David, and is a barely disguised satirical allegory of the contemporary GDR and of communist regimes.<sup>6</sup> As part of its modernistic poetics, the novel does not focus on the story line itself but rather on the imagined, alleged process by which the story, i.e. the biblical text, was composed. According to Heym, the task of writing the biblical text was assigned to a "committee" (an unmistakable reference to a communist practice), formed by King Solomon. The ruler expects the committee to glorify King David, Solomon's father, in its "report" and thereby to strengthen the legitimacy of Solomon's own rule. The person put in charge of writing the report, however, is not part of King Solomon's entourage. In order to gain credibility, the committee invites an outsider, Ethan the scrivener, an author-historian, to perform that task. Ethan represents the dilemmas facing a writer in a totalitarian regime (probably representing Heym's own personal situation<sup>7</sup>): to maneuver between the ruler's expectations and his own conscience, moral integrity and commitment to truth. The book follows the footsteps of Ethan in his quest for facts about King David's path to the throne, the way he ruled his kingdom, and how King Solomon became his legitimate heir.

The more the quest for these facts progresses, the more it becomes clear that the biblical story of King David as we know it is a product of King Solomon's committee, namely, it primarily narrates the official version of history, attempting to conceal or whitewash the many morally dubious actions committed by King David (e.g. using Jonathan and Michal, King Saul's children, as mere pawns in his relentless climb to power). Into this official version, however, certain not-so-nice facts have nevertheless been introduced. These subversive elements can be detected in a few contradictions and discrepancies in the text (e.g. leaving in two versions that tell how the young David first met King Saul), and they are there thanks to Ethan and his untiring investigations. Ethan's investigations include the uncovering of buried official documents, such as interviews with people who personally knew King David, among others.

The novel describes at length the risks taken by Ethan, representing authors who try to maintain their moral integrity in a totalitarian regime. And indeed, Ethan pays a costly price for his attempt to compose a truthful report: his cherished concubine, Lilith, is sent to Solomon's harem; and Esther, his beloved wife who represents the purity of his soul, falls ill and ultimately dies because she cannot stand the (literal and metaphorical) air of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, even before Ethan starts his historical-biographical project, Heym makes it clear that King Solomon is a corrupt ruler who cares only for his own interests. He employs a mixture of incentives, temptations, threats, and deceit to achieve

his goals, and does not shun the use of brutal force against his own people (carried out by Benaiah, a loyal army general with the instincts of a Stasi agent).

Thus, whereas the original goal of the committee's report had been to glorify King David and to strengthen the legitimacy of Solomon's rule, the result, according to Heym, is a far more complex text. Despite official efforts to censure the subversive traces of unflattering truth about King David and King Solomon, Heym suggests that attentive, critical readers of the product of King Solomon's committee (i.e. the biblical text), will be able to decipher the truth. As Angela Borgwardt persuasively argues (2002 : 211-216), Heym's indirect critique of the GDR in *The King David Report* does not necessarily amount to a radical rejection of his belief in socialism; he was still holding fast to the belief that truth would ultimately prevail despite censorship and oppressive measures taken by the state. According to Borgwardt (2002 : 214) Heym's cautious optimism can be detected in the concluding paragraphs of the novel, in which Ethan expresses his faith in God's "grand plan" and refuses to curse the city of Jerusholayim (Heym, 1997 : 252).

One interesting aspect of Heym's *The King David Report* is related to gossip and its function. Heym suggests that in the reality of a totalitarian regime gossip may fulfill a positive function: a vital means for circulating subversive truth. It is through gossip that unpleasant truths about Solomon, about other officials of the court, and about the general political situation in Jerusalem, are circulated. In one telling scene, Ethan's two sons, Shem and Sheleph, return from the market, telling Ethan about certain rumors they have heard there:

And Shem and Sheleph asked if it was true that King Solomon was sick with fear so that he shook and two servants, one on his right and one on his left, were needed to hold him; and if the damsel Abishag of Shunam, who had ministered to King David, was now lying with Prince Adonijah; and if Zadok the priest did not cause the best of the sacrificial meats to be sold on the market; and if Jehoshaphat ben Ahilud, the recorder, did not receive a share of the profits being earned by the use of the forced labour in the construction of the temple; and if the Royal Commission on the Preparation of the Report on the Amazing Rise and so forth, for which I worked, was not a cabal of falsifiers and prevaricators; and if, in brief, the whole kingdom of Israel was not going to the dogs. (Heym, 1997 : 172)

These rumors, while given to some exaggeration, nevertheless provide insights into the state of affairs in Solomon's palace and the political atmosphere in Jerusalem. Moreover, despite the colorful language of the "juicy" news circulating in the market, they are much more faithful to the truth than the fabrications of the court officials. According to Heym, gossip is responsible for disseminating sensational, but also truthful, facts, despite attempts to suppress them by the spokespersons or appointed prophets in Solomon's entourage. Heym creates an analogy between the vulgar rumors (vulgar in the original sense of the word, namely of the common people, the *vulgus*) about Solomon's court and the investigations conducted by Ethan to reveal the truth about King David: both are in contrast to an authoritative narrative that attempts to hide or embellish unpleasant truth. And while in most cases the ruler succeeds in imposing his narrative, there is still a ray of hope: truth cannot be totally extinguished and it surfaces in the gossip of the marketplace as well as in the traces left in official documents written by honest, truth-seeking writers.

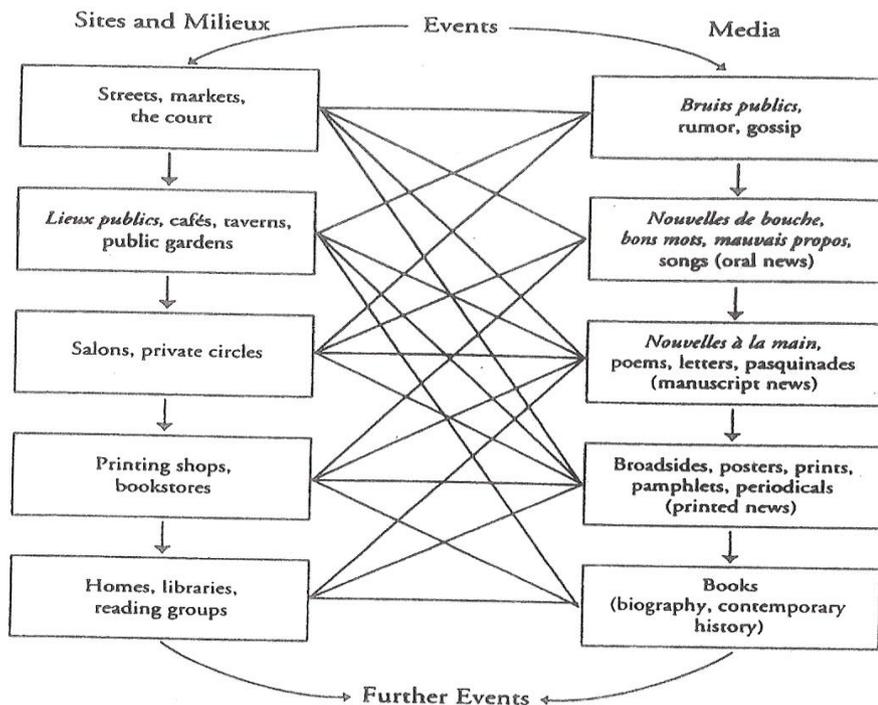
Does Heym's description of the positive function of gossip in ancient Israel have any historical validity or is it merely a product of his lively literary imagination? Since there is no authentic documentation of gossip from biblical times, no one can give a satisfactory answer to this question. I would like to argue, however, that there is not necessarily a contradiction between writing an imaginative literary work and providing a deep insight into the nature and function of gossip in authoritarian regimes, ancient and modern alike. We should remember that, at least as far as the GDR and other communist countries are concerned, Heym offers a picture that is basically faithful to reality, albeit with satirical exaggeration; he was, after all, only too familiar with the political, cultural and security system of the GDR.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps he somewhat stretched the analogy between modern,

communist totalitarian regimes, on the one hand, and the ancient Kingdom of Israel, on the other. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that similar mechanisms are to be found in both the ancient and the modern authoritarian regimes, including the tense relationship between the official narrative and other versions that circulate in the form of gossip and rumors in the marketplace.

To substantiate the idea that Heym offers in *The King David Report* not only a powerful satirical comment on the GDR but also a valuable insight into the role of gossip in non-democratic societies, I would like to make a small historical leap. This will take us far away from both ancient Israel and the twentieth-century GDR, directly into eighteenth-century France.

### Gossip in the Jardin du Luxembourg and Palais-Royal in the Eighteenth Century

Robert Darnton's meticulous historical research into the diverse channels for communicating news in Paris of the eighteenth century (Darnton, 2000) offers an interesting, indirect corroboration of Heym's insight regarding the social function of gossip in authoritarian regimes. Darnton presents in this seminal study a multi-dimensional schematic model of a communication circuit of that period (Darnton, 2000 : 8; first introduced in Darnton, 1995 : 189), in which gossip and rumors have an important place, as follows:



Note the upper right column, where gossip and rumors are presented as the source of news that will later be transmitted through (and also be fed by) different channels of oral and written media. Darnton's multi-dimensional model and the accompanying examples suggest that gossip was responsible for the circulation of some subversive truths about *L'Ancien regime* in the streets of eighteenth-century Paris: "juicy" stories about King Louis XV's weakness, his love affairs, corruption, silenced scandals, etc. Such rumors and gossip were circulating in coffee houses, salons, the streets, and the marketplace. There may have been no coffee houses in ancient Israel, but there were definitely places of public gathering - like the market to which Heym alludes - and it is reasonable to assume that in such places rumors would have circulated.

One important locus where subversive rumors were circulating in Paris of the eighteenth century was the Jardin du Luxembourg. We know about this not only from written sources but also from contemporary drawings: one drawing portrays in a semi-realistic, semi-caricature manner a group of *nouvellistes* discussing "the latest news" (BNF, 88C 134231; Figure 2 in Darnton, 2000 : 5). Another drawing represents in a detailed allegorical manner a famous location in the Palais-Royal where rumors were spread: *L'Arbre de Cracovie* (BNF, 96A 74336; see Figure 2 in Darnton, 2000 : 3). Here is how Darnton describes the place:

To find out what was really going on, you went to the tree of Cracow. It was a large, leafy chestnut tree, which stood at the heart of Paris in the gardens of the Palais-Royal. It probably had acquired its name from heated discussions that took place around it during the War of the Polish Succession (1733-1735), although the name also suggested rumor-mongering (*craquer*: to tell dubious stories). Like a mighty magnet, the tree attracted *nouvellistes de bouche*, or newsmongers, who spread information about current events by word of mouth. They claimed to know, from private sources (a letter, an indiscreet servant, a remark overheard in an antechamber of Versailles), what was really happening in the corridors of power - and the people in power took them seriously, because the government worried about what Parisians were saying. Foreign diplomats allegedly sent agents to pick up news or to plant it at the foot of the tree of Cracow. (Darnton, 2000 : 2)

The resemblance between Darnton's historical, systematic description of the forms and functions of gossip and rumors in eighteenth-century Paris and Heym's literary portrayal of rumors in ancient Israel (and its satirical reference in the modern-day GDR) is almost unavoidable. These two descriptions seem to echo and to complement one another.

#### Concluding Remarks: Gossip in Authoritarian Regimes

Thus, Heym's criticism of the GDR through an iconoclastic portrayal of ancient Israel may offer a deep insight into the relationship between official narratives and truth, and into the role of gossip in non-democratic societies. In one important sense, both Heym and Darnton seem to share a Bakhtinian perspective on language-in-society as a multivalent, polyphonic system (e.g. Bakhtin, 1981). In the way Bakhtin contrasts Dostoevsky's art with that of Tolstoy, Caryl Emerson aptly summarizes Bakhtin's basic opposition of dialogism and monologism:

Monologism is a brand of idealism that insists on the unity of a single consciousness. [...] Wherever monologic perception dominates, everything is seen in false unity - as the spirit of a nation, of a people, of history. This unity is false because it is only an apparent oneness; in fact, monologism demarcates, abstracts, excludes, and it is only from within this closed and lopped-off system that everything can be seen as one. Dialogism alone allows for the restoration of a larger, inclusive unity in diversity, through the sort of comprehension of opposites that Bakhtin would later extol in Rabelais. (Emerson, 1985 : 69)

According to such a Bakhtinian perspective, authoritarian regimes try to impose a monological language or narrative; they attempt to unify language, a phenomenon which in both reality and in principle is heterogeneous. And since gossip is typically a heterogeneous discourse, it is opposed to a unified language or narrative. The following table summarizes certain conspicuous characteristics of subversive gossip, as opposed to the official discourse in non-democratic societies according to Heym's literary and Darnton's historical accounts.

	Official Discourse	Gossip
Source of information	Single; Identifiable	Multiple; Anonymous <sup>10</sup>
Direction of information	Top-bottom	Bottom-bottom
Modality of information	Assertive	Conjectural
Focus of information	Lofty aspects of people	Lowly aspects of people
Relation to truth	Distorts truth	Reflects truth

Whereas one might expect that truth would be uttered by an identifiable source enjoying a privileged position and pronounced in an assertive tone, according to both Heym and Darnton the chances are that truthful statements would, instead, be found circulating among multiple sources that enjoy no privileged position, despite such statements being merely hearsay. In short, truth is to be found in gossip rather than in the official bulletins of authoritarian regimes.

In the above table and throughout this essay I have referred to the role played by gossip in authoritarian, non-democratic societies. One may argue that the above distinctions also apply to democratic societies. Indeed, the opposition between democratic and non-democratic societies is neither simple nor binary; certain manipulations of truth evident in authoritarian regimes can also be found in democratic societies (e.g. political spin to sway public opinion; attempts to mold public opinion through biased media). We may recall in this context Foucault's perspective on social power, which is not understood in a negative and narrow meaning, as a direct repressive element, nor is it confined to its use by the state.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, we should not forget (*pace* Foucault) one major difference between democratic and non-democratic societies regarding the possibility of expressing criticism: in the former, critical voices may be marginalized but they are still part of the public discourse; whereas in the latter such voices are persecuted.

This basic difference has important implications regarding the role of gossip: in a democratic society critical voices are indeed publicly heard; but, nonetheless, in non-democratic societies, where public channels of communication are censored, critical voices do not disappear altogether - rather, they are channeled into rumors and gossip, circulating in the market, in the barber shop, in the coffee house, in one's living room, and in today's Internet culture on web-blogs and Facebook.<sup>12</sup> Thus, gossip becomes part of a "grass-roots" discourse that circulates unpleasant truths about the government. Sometimes this kind of bottom-bottom circulation (between neighbors, café customers) may even find its way up: according to Darnton, into newspapers and books; and according to Heym, even into the most canonical text of all - the Bible.

I started this essay by quoting a few biblical verses used in moralistic denunciations of gossip. Heym's literary re-telling of the biblical story of King David and Darnton's historical research of eighteenth-century France offer a much more favorable view of gossip. According to them, gossip is a potentially liberating power in authoritarian, non-democratic societies. Before we start praising gossip, however, as inherently and necessarily a progressive power, a word of caution is needed. We should be cautious in our generalizations not only because we can cite examples, from our private experience and from public life, in which gossip and rumors have had a harmful effect, but also because authoritarian regimes too can sometimes use rumors - as a weapon against dissenting voices, as a manipulation for isolating and suffocating those voices.<sup>13</sup>

In view of this possibility, can we come up with any generalization at all about the social function of gossip in non-democratic societies? Perhaps all we can say is that gossip has the potential to serve both a liberating and an oppressive function. The key to answering these questions satisfactorily seems to lie in tracing the source of the rumors in question: when they come from "above," from identifiable official sources (e.g. a spokesperson, an agent of the secret service), we are most probably dealing with a cynical, calculated manipulation that aims to suffocate dissenting voices or plays a part in a power struggle within the regime (e.g. an attempt to besmirch a rival); but when rumors come from "below" and their source cannot be traced, the chances are that they play a liberating function. In such contexts and with this added caveat, political gossip and rumors, while replete with exaggerations and small distortions, can nevertheless carry the torch of liberating truth in an oppressive regime.

## Notes

\* I would like to thank Dawn Cornelio and Stéphanie Nutting, organizers of the Gossip conference, for their encouraging response, and the anonymous reviewers of my essay for offering useful comments.

<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew expression used in these two verses, translated as slander or gossip is הוֹלֵךְ רִכִּיל, literally meaning "to go gossip" or "to go slander," emphasizing the dynamic nature of the phenomenon, implying that gossip is always "on the move."

<sup>2</sup> The Greek term used here is ψιθυριστής, sometimes translated as "whisperers" (in the form "to whisperers"). In the standard classical Greek lexicon (Liddell & Scott), the verb (ψιθυρίζω) is translated as "whisper what one dares not speak out; whisper slanders." Thus, the NIV translation of "gossips" seems quite appropriate. Note also that the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation of the Bible - the great grandchild of the King James Version - also translates the word in Paul's text as "gossips." I would like to thank my colleague Dr. David Satran for his learned help with the Greek.

<sup>3</sup> I focus here on certain biblical verses but it should be noted that the negative image of gossip and rumors is rooted not only in the Bible but also in classical literature, especially in the allegorical descriptions of *fama* by Virgil (notably *Aeneid* 4. 174 ff) and Ovid (notably *Metamorphoses* 12. 39 ff). I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Aminadav Dykman for reminding me of these *loci classici*.

<sup>4</sup> These formulations are taken from OED online edition (definition 3.a.): <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/80198?rskey=WsDbJB&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>

<sup>5</sup> For an instructive discussion of gossip's social functions from an evolutionary perspective, with a special attention to its role in censuring social "free riders", see Dunbar 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Reich-Ranicki, 1974; Hutchinson, 1986; Hutchinson, 1992; Tait, 2001; Borgwardt, 2002 (especially pp. 137-266), Tait, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> These parallels include not only the fact that, just like Ethan in the novel, Heym felt isolated because of the repressing cultural policy in the GDR but also because Heym's first wife had recently died (Borgwardt, 2002 : 211-212) - like the fate of one of Ethan's wives in the novel.

<sup>8</sup> Only Huldah, the mother of Ethan's children, is left unharmed. Thus, Heym suggests that Ethan's "fertility" - as a father of real and metaphorical offspring (i.e. his text) alike - will survive. For a symbolic reading of Ethan's three wives, see Fishelov, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Recall in this context *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006), the German movie (directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck) that presents the tactics used by the Stasi to maintain political control.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note one superficial difference between Bakhtin's opposition of monologism and dialogism and this line of the chart: whereas Bakhtin associates monologism with *impersonal* truth and dialogism with personal, individual consciousness (Emerson, 1985), this line links monologic discourse with an individual source and vice versa. This difference, however, does not necessarily contradict Bakhtin's perspective because the individual sources to whom I refer here (e.g. a government agent who spreads a rumor) present themselves as representing impersonal truth.

<sup>11</sup> "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression." (Foucault, 1984 : 61)

<sup>12</sup> Recent upheavals in non-democratic countries have demonstrated the role played by Internet platforms such as Facebook in circulating subversive rumors and even in pushing towards political changes.

<sup>13</sup> I would like to thank participants at the Conference on Gossip, at Guelph University, especially Christine Neufeld, who called my attention to this potential of gossip, during the discussion that followed my presentation.

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